Depot Town Rag

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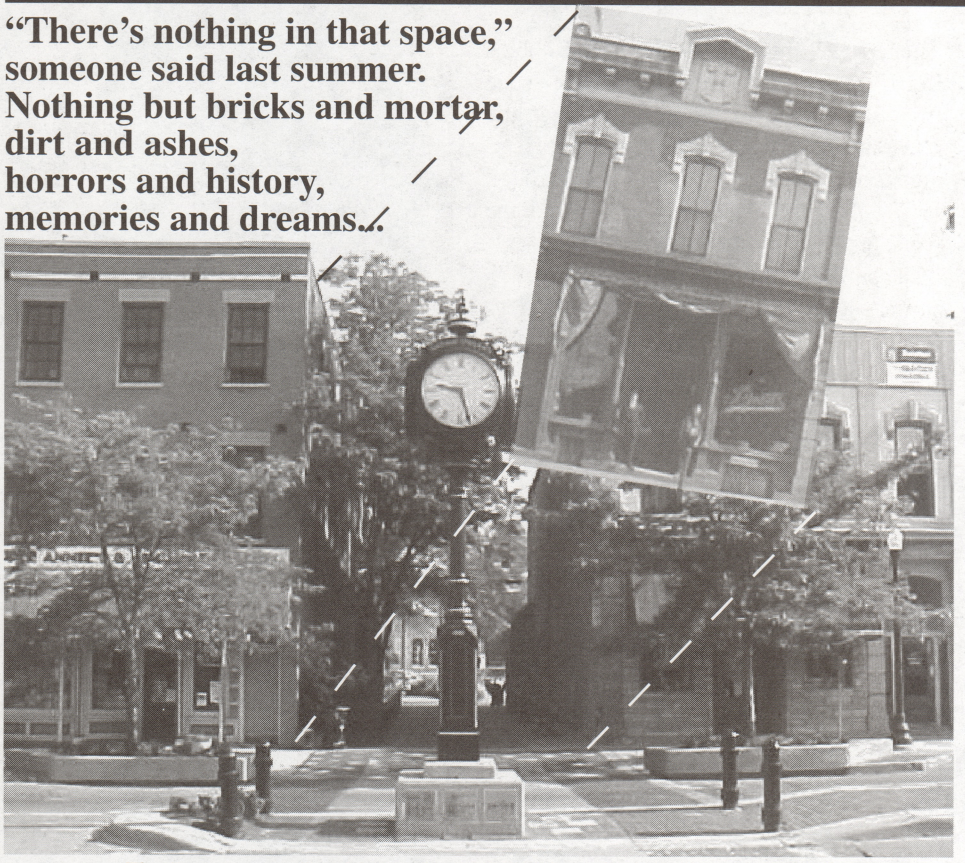
Vacancies don't last very long on this block

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

"There's nothing in that space," someone said last summer. Nothing but bricks and mortar, dirt and ashes, horrors and history, memories and dreams..



The "empty space" at 31 East Cross in 2009 was Deist's Grocery in 1929

Victor Deist's FANCY GROCERIES store recalled

Above: Chas Deist family at the Freighthouse in 1929
Left: Market Alley occupies the space where Deist's Grocery had stood

31 East Cross is gone, but not forgotten

31 East Cross: burned out

-James Mann

Market Alley links East Cross Street with the Freighthouse behind the line of buildings on the north side of the street. On one side are the memorial signs reminding those who walk by of the past of Ypsilanti. A close look at the walls of the adjoining buildings shows this was not always an open space. Rows of bricks on each side of the alley give evidence of an earlier structure.

This building was most likely built in the 1880s after a fire destroyed the buildings at that end of the block. This structure, according to records in the care of the City Assessor, was made of brick, had two floors with a full basement and stone foundation. The first floor had one room for retail space and the second floor was a four-room apartment. The building was 66 feet 2 inches long and 23 feet wide.

The building was occupied by the end of the 19th century by C.M. Fairchild & Co., run by Charles and Myron Fairchild. Charles lived on the second floor of the building with his wife Lillie. Myron, who may have been the father of Charles, boarded with the couple. The business sold meat, flour and feed.

Fairchild & Co., had closed by 1916, and [*continued overleaf*]

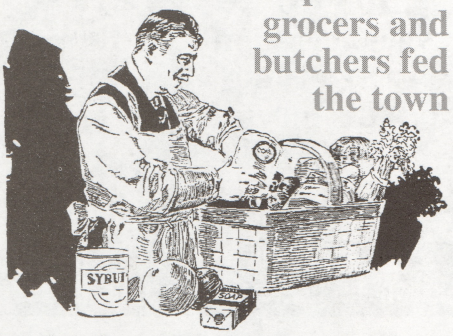
Firefighters tell of "the big one"

Jim Roberts, now fire chief for Superior Township, remembers the big fire at 31 East Cross in 1973. "It was a huge fire," he recalls, "but we had good fire stops on each side and it did not spread to the other buildings. It took forever, but we finally got it out."

Another former Ypsilanti firefighter, Bob Taylor, remembers being assigned to the interior upper floor of the building next door to watch for smoke coming through the bricks.

After the 'knock-down,' Chief Ralph Crawford had Roberts and other firefighters stay with what remained of the building all night. "It was good that we did, since the back porches and staircases of all the buildings to the west had caught fire and went up fast," Roberts remembers. "They were gone in a flash."

The remains of the building were in such precarious condition that the City had to enforce Public Act #207 to knock it down the next day for public safety. "What was left went down easily," Roberts remembers, and most of it was pushed into the basement and covered over.



Depot Town grocers and butchers fed the town

Burned out [*continued from page one*]
Deist's Grocery then occupied the space. The store was run by Victor Deist and his wife Mollie. The couple lived on the floor above with their son Charles. Victor died of double pneumonia on December 11, 1932, after running the store for 21 years. Mollie and son Charles continued to run the store until 1940. Mollie and son Charles continued to live in the apartment while the retail space was rented out to others. Mollie died December 30, 1957 at 68. She was interred with her husband in the Mausoleum at Highland Cemetery. Charles remained in the apartment until 1971 when he moved to 220 North Hamilton. After he moved out, the apartment remained vacant.

The store was occupied by the Sanitary Products Company in 1941 and then by the Pierce Grocery in 1942. The retail space was vacant in 1943 and Railway Express Agency was there in 1945. The Robbins Refrigeration Company occupied the space from about 1948 to about 1953. Then the space was occupied by the Lobbestael Heating contractor from about 1954 through 1967. Factory Outlet Furniture used the space until 1973.

The building was destroyed by fire in 1973 and was a total loss. According to local legend, the rubble was pushed into the basement and covered over before the owner, Charles Deist, was informed of the fire. Charles Deist died at his home on North Hamilton on January 8, 1983 at the age of 73. He is entombed in the Mausoleum at Highland Cemetery with his parents.

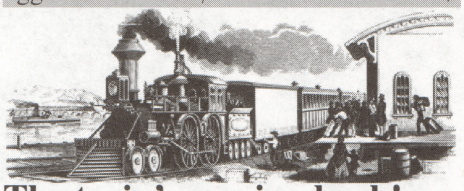
Almost all trace of the building that once stood here is now gone, but the site is not completely empty as those who are making new memories walk through Market Alley in search of the future.

Mollie Deist stacks newspapers on the cigar counter. Glass-front cabinets were lighted mostly from the south-facing store window

Mollie Deist takes a break after artfully stacking canned goods nearly to the ceiling

A 1929 grocery list

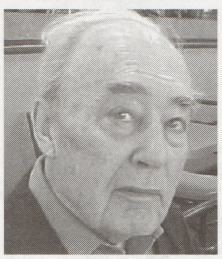
Bacon 1 lb.	47¢	Macaroni 3 lbs	25¢
Bread 1 lb.	10¢	Milk Gal.	28¢
Butter 1 lb.	56¢	Navy Beans lb.	10¢
Carmel Wafers	36¢	Oranges 1 doz.	57¢
Cheese 1 lb.	38¢	Peaches 1 lb.	17¢
Chicken lb.	42¢	Pineapple	40¢
Codfish 1 lb.	29¢	Potatoes 10 lbs.	36¢
Coffee 1 lb.	45¢	Prunes 3 lbs.	25¢
Cornmeal 1 lb.	6¢	Rib Roast lb.	39¢
Eggs 1 doz.	59¢	Rd Beef Stk lb.	43¢



The train's coming back!

At November's DTA meeting, DDA's Sandee French reported Detroit/Ann Arbor passenger trains are expected to start stopping in Depot Town again in 2010. The depot location has not yet been determined.

Ypsilantians recall where parents shopped in The Great Depression



Gordon Cahours, (educator) b. 1920, 413 S. Huron, Sunkule's, Brooks Market, Camp Studio, Weber Drug

Herb Miller, b. 1930, (Ford Motor Co.) Brooks' Market, Weber Drug

Marilyn Begole Freatman, b. 1927, 922 Michigan Ave., "We shopped at grandfather's store next to Warner Dairy."

Bill Anhut, (attorney) b. 1930, "We brought Dad in every day from our farm at Ford & Prospect to catch the commuter train to his office in Detroit."

Roger Katon, b. 1926 (Hayward's Men's Clothing) A&P, Weber Drug, Sinkule's Market

Bob Willoughby, (podiatrist) b. 1920, 123 College Place, McPherson & House groceries

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"Mollie and her sister" appear to have finished sweeping the grocery store's floor

Everything was just "fine" back in 1929

In the Dark Ages before Political Correctness, girls or women were commonly refered to in slang terms: broad, bunny, canary (if she could sing), charity girl (promiscuous), dame, doll, cat's meow, cat's whiskers. Many of the pejorative terms seeped into common usage through the music of the day.

Before television dominated family life, parlor games included mah-jhong, ouija boards, and crossword puzzles.

Much like today's Great Train Race in Depot Town, endurance races of all sorts gained popularity and included marathons and flagpole sitting. Dance marathons began in 1923 and became the rage. Harry Houdini, the great escape artist of the time, made his last appearance in Detroit.

The annual Miss America contest began in Atlantic City in 1921. Margaret Gorman (16 years old) was the first winner with measurements of 30-25-32. Dance crazes included the Charleston, the Black Bottom, and the Shimmy.

While New York society dined at Sardi's, Ypsilanti's hoi polloi came to Depot Town establishments—just as they do today.

Down by the depot

Shoppers scoured the block for the best offerings

Charley Deist behind the counter with his parents. Dad, Victor, guards the cigar counter while Mom, Mollie, watches the cash register

From the 1929 Ypsilanti City Directory:

(Grocers and meat markets in boldface)

On East Cross Street

10 Vacant
15 Chipman Edgar S. filling station
16 Griffin Chas hard goods
17 Ypsilanti Cartage & Storage Co
17-19 Elk-Skin Moccasin Mfg Co
18 Van Aken Arth E. plumber
19 **Kroger Gro & Bkg Co**
10 Not listed
21 Vacant
22 Not listed
23 Vacant

24 Michigamme Oil Co filling station
25 **Davis Harry A meats Power Thos H**
27 Ypsilanti Sheet Metal Wks Wolf Gus H
29 Mackraft System signs McKie Chas L
30 **Great A&P Tea Co grocery**
31 **Diest Victor C grocery**
32 Not listed
33-35 Park-Wood Candy Co
34 **Sinkule Matthew meats**
36 Smith Chas W Ypsi Decorating Shop
37 Weber Alf drugs, Post Office Sta No 2
38 **Lee & Cady wholesale grocery**
39-41 Oliver House hotel Klavitter Richd
40 DeVee Morgan H barber
42-46 Newell Block
44 **Davis & Co grocery**
46 **McPherson & House grocery**
48 American Railway Express Co
50 Dillon J E Co medicine mfr
52 Vealey Harley J restaurant
54 Camp Publishing Co
56 Holk Niels soft drinks
58 Ollett Bert C restaurant
(demolished by 1939 train wreck;
M C R R depot
100 Scott Sturtevant jr autos Whippet & Willys Knight Sales & Service,
107 Tryon Jesse
120 Not listed

On North River Street

311 Tubbs Orison J. Evangelistic Mission
312 Not listed
319 Palmer Construction Co
400-06 Thompson O E & Sons agri implt
408-10 City Storehouse

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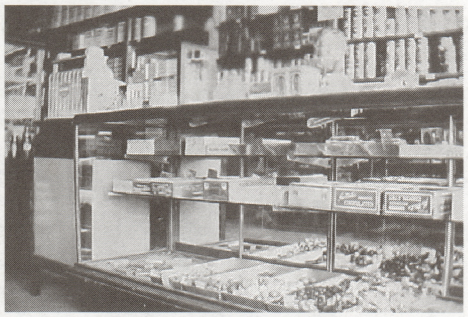

Dorothy Morhous Hutchinson (left) was a neice of Victor Deist and lived next door to "Grandpa and Grandma Diest" on Maple Street. Born in 1921, Hutchinson remembers shopping for penny candy at Diest's grocery as an eight-year-old.

Kids could stand in front of Deist's candy counter and take as long as they wished to spend their pennies. Sometimes, if you stood there long enough, you didn't even need a penny.

Storefront updated: three generations exhibit

At Shankwiler 1,2,3 November 30th

Daughter Michelle and Dad Craig get the family's art together for grand openings in December and January

Donald and Beverly Shankwiler came to Depot Town in the early 1970s to create a home and a studio for Beverly's sculpture while she taught in EMU's Department of Art. Don taught in the public schools and they brought their four kids along to help with the project in what had been known as the Artrain Building.

The Shankwiler family moved to the three-story commercial space at 52 E. Cross and made headlines as they dove into the beginnings of this block's restoration and preservation. Their children, Becky, Donna, Ward, and Craig, were featured in popular media accounts of "urban pioneers" making living spaces for their family.

Beverly followed founder Gerry French as second president of DTA and the success of the district is a testament to their early dreams and organizational efforts.

Now son Craig returns with partners Naomi Rentfrow and daughter Michelle Shankwiler to continue the family's artistic tradition. Craig Shankwiler says, "We started out with his eBay thing for sports cards and wound up doing very well. Now we want to make this commercial address an eBay drop-off store."

The family's new Depot Town venture, **Shankwiler 1-2-3**, will feature sculpture and artworks by the matriarch Beverly, sports cards and stained glass from Craig's collection, glass and Webkins from partner Naomi, and sculpture and jewelry by daughter/partner/manager Michelle.

Some might say all this has been done before, of course, by the Wyeth family of Chadds Ford, PA. Father, N.C. Wyeth, was an illustrator and artist; his children were painter Andrew, inventor Nathaniel, and artist Henriette Wyeth Hurd. And then came Andrew's son Jamie, another painter of great fame.

The Wyeth and Shankwiler families carry on their traditional artistic traditions and at least one of those families is right here on the block in Ypsilanti. See **Shankwiler 1-2-3** at 35 E. Cross Street and reacquaint yourself with one of the most highly creative families in America.

Depot Town Rag

"All the news that fits, we print"
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400 Market Place, The Old Caboose
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To the editor:
thomasdodd@comcast.net

The Depot Town Association, Inc.

Gary McKeever, President
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Website: www.depottown.org
DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 E. Cross Street.

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Special thanks to Rod & Dorothy Hutchinson and the Ypsilanti Historical Archives for photos of the Deist grocery

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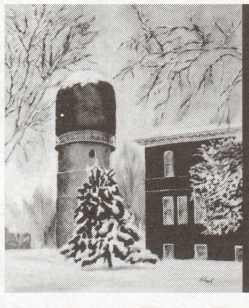

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80 years ago at the depot

On Being & Nothingness

Depot Town's last, ever, treatise on existentialism

Those Seinfeld smarty pants discovered it's not about nothing, after all

Of his popular TV sit-com, Jerry Seinfeld said, "It's a show about *nothing*. That's the theme." With its inimitable take on life's most mundane moments, Seinfeld—ubiquitously and ironically referred to as "the show about nothing"—garnered countless accolades, and initiated a string of words and terms into America's pop culture lexicon. Seinfeld stretched *nothingness* back into being.

Billy Crystal, in his comedic role as "Grandpa," says, "When I was your age there was *nothing* over there! *Nothing*. It was all empty over there!"

In the 1943 philosophical treatise by Jean-Paul Sartre s*aid, "L'Être et le néant : Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique,"* marking the beginning of the growth of existentialism in the 20th century. Its main purpose was to define consciousness as transcendent. Its secondary purpose may have been to find out whatever happened to Deist's grocery store down in Ypsilanti's historic Depot Town.

Casey Stengle described Depot Town's dilemma without even knowing it: "Nobody goes there anymore; it's too crowded." There's *nothing* to it.

The implicit purpose of Ypsilanti's Historic District Ordinance is to ensure that we will not be pointing to things that used to be there. Today's senior citizens tour their old neighborhoods to find their childhood homes, schools, and churches demolished. "My old elementary school was replaced by a Big Box video rental store," said one gray head recently relocated to this block. Another was surprised to find a new friend's house used to sit right behind her aunt and uncle's house. All are gone now—houses, aunt, uncle, and friend. Such absences leave big holes in our lives. *Nothing*-ness scares us.

Contrary to recent promos, much of Depot Town is gone, too:

• All the district's original wooden buildings were gone since before any of us were born. The old structures we see today are the second generation to grow up around the depot.

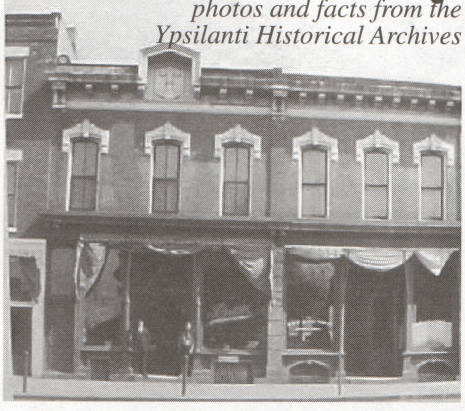
• For all practical purposes, Cass Park in front of the depot is gone. The land is there, but there are no park amenities, no Civil War monument, and no sign to preserve the park's memory.

• The rail yard is gone; roundhouse, water tower, greenhouse, all the ancillary outbuildings. Only one live track remains. The upper two floors of the glorious Victorian depot are gone.

• All of the railroad's house tracks connecting to the backs of our buildings are gone, but the remnants of one can still be seen just north of the Ypsilanti Food Co-op.

The Deist Grocery

photos and facts from the Ypsilanti Historical Archives



Left to right in 2009: James MacDonald/Apple Annie's, Market Alley, Cheeky Monkey

The Deist family in 1929. On the shelves: cigars, work gloves, canned goods. An inside stairway led to the family's second floor apartment.

The Freighthouse has begun construction on the rain garden to be located at the north end of the building. The Farmer's Market will move its operation back to the Market Plaza between the Freighthouse and The Old Caboose. The canopy will be moved in three sections and the hours for next season will be Saturdays, 8a.m.-2p.m.

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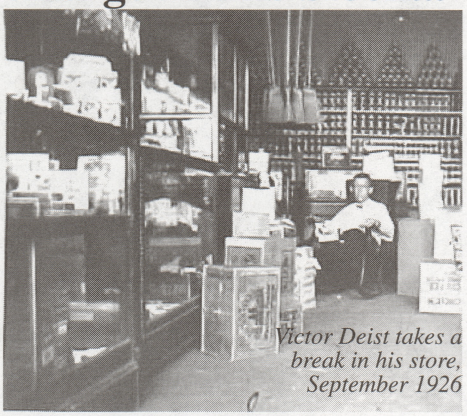

Victor Deist takes a break in his store, September 1926

Victor Deist kept a chair where he could rest and have a good cigar after stocking his shelves. Fifty years later, a shopkeeper confided how keeping a small television in the back room helped his business. "If we had been at home, we would just have been watching TV, so we brought the TV to the store's back room and stayed open longer. We were happy to discover our longer hours paid the rent for a year!"

Such practicality continues in these old commercial properties. That could be the reason the district has so few vacancies––even in a time of great business crises and financial distress.

What's new? Not much.

Tradition keeps on keeping on down between the river and the railroad track. Local folks still stop by for fresh produce at the Farmer's Market and the Ypsilanti Food Cooperative. There's great food at the neighborhood restaurants and grills. And district shopkeepers welcome their clientele with a warm smile and heartfelt "hello!"

Coming soon:
Festivals • Car Shows
Concerts • Sidewalk Sales
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Special Events
Same old, fascinating place!

...the more they seem to stay the same

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